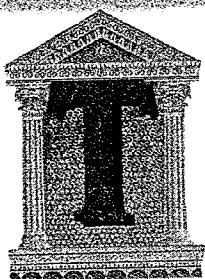


5 The Persian Wars



The Beginning of the War In the first lesson you learned that there were a number of Greek city-states on the coast of Asia Minor. About 546 B.C. these city-states came under the control of the Persians, who appointed harsh tyrants to rule each city-state.

Around 499 B.C. the city-state of Miletus (mye LEET us) rebelled against Persian rule. The people of Miletus asked the Greeks in other city-states to help them overthrow the Persians. The Spartans refused, but the Athenians agreed to help.

In 498 B.C., the Athenians crossed the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor. They conquered the Persian-controlled city of Sardis. When the other Greek city-states in Asia Minor saw that Athens was victorious, they decided to join in the revolt against the Persians.

The Athenians felt their point had been made, and they went home. Within three years, the Persian king Darius had put down the revolt and regained control of the Greek city-states in Asia Minor.

Even though they had regained control of their empire, the Persians were angry with the Athenians. In 490 B.C. the Persians crossed the Aegean Sea to punish the Athenians.

Marathon

The Athenians and Persians met on the plain at Marathon, about 26 miles from Athens. The Athenians were badly outnumbered, but they decided to

attack. The Greek charge was a success. The Persians broke ranks and fled to their ships, and the Greeks cut them down as they ran. By the end of the battle, more than 6,000 Persians were dead, while only 192 Greeks had fallen.

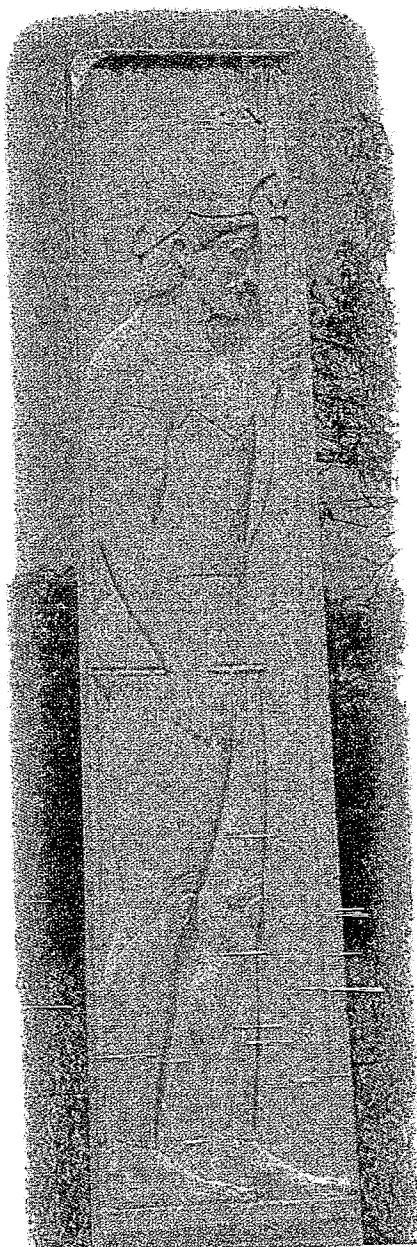
According to legend, the Greeks ordered a messenger to run to Athens and deliver news of the victory. The messenger ran the 26 miles to Athens, gasped out his victory announcement, "Rejoice, we conquer!" and died of exhaustion. Today, we use the word *marathon* to refer to a 26-mile footrace that is run in the modern Olympics.

Marathon was an extremely important battle. Because the Athenians won, they were filled with self-confidence. They began to think that they were the most powerful of all the Greeks.

Thermopylae

The Persians were not yet done with the Athenians. In 480 B.C. another Persian army was dispatched to defeat the Greeks. With an army of more than 100,000 men as well as 600 to 700 ships, the Persian king Xerxes (ZURK seez) (486–465 B.C.) was determined to conquer all of Greece.

This monument in Marathon commemorates an Athenian warrior who fought there.



Athens and Sparta put aside their disagreements and united against the Persians. They were joined by a few other city-states. The Greeks had between 200 and 300 ships and an army of 10,000 men. The army was led by King Leonidas (lee AHN uh dus) of Sparta.

The Greeks realized that the longer they could put off a major battle, the better their chances would be. The Greeks decided to delay the Persian army by engaging them at a place called Thermopylae (thur MAHP uh lee), about 75 miles northwest of Athens. Thermopylae was a narrow pass between high cliffs and the sea. Because the pass is so narrow, only part of the huge Persian army could attack at one time, and the Greeks might be able to hold the pass.

Things did not turn out exactly as planned. Leonidas and his troops showed great courage and managed to hold the pass for two days, but a traitor showed the Persians how to use a mountain path to slip around the Greeks. When Leonidas realized what had happened, he ordered the majority of the Greeks to retreat, while he and 300 Spartans stayed behind to hold back the Persian army. All 300 of the Spartans died defending the pass.

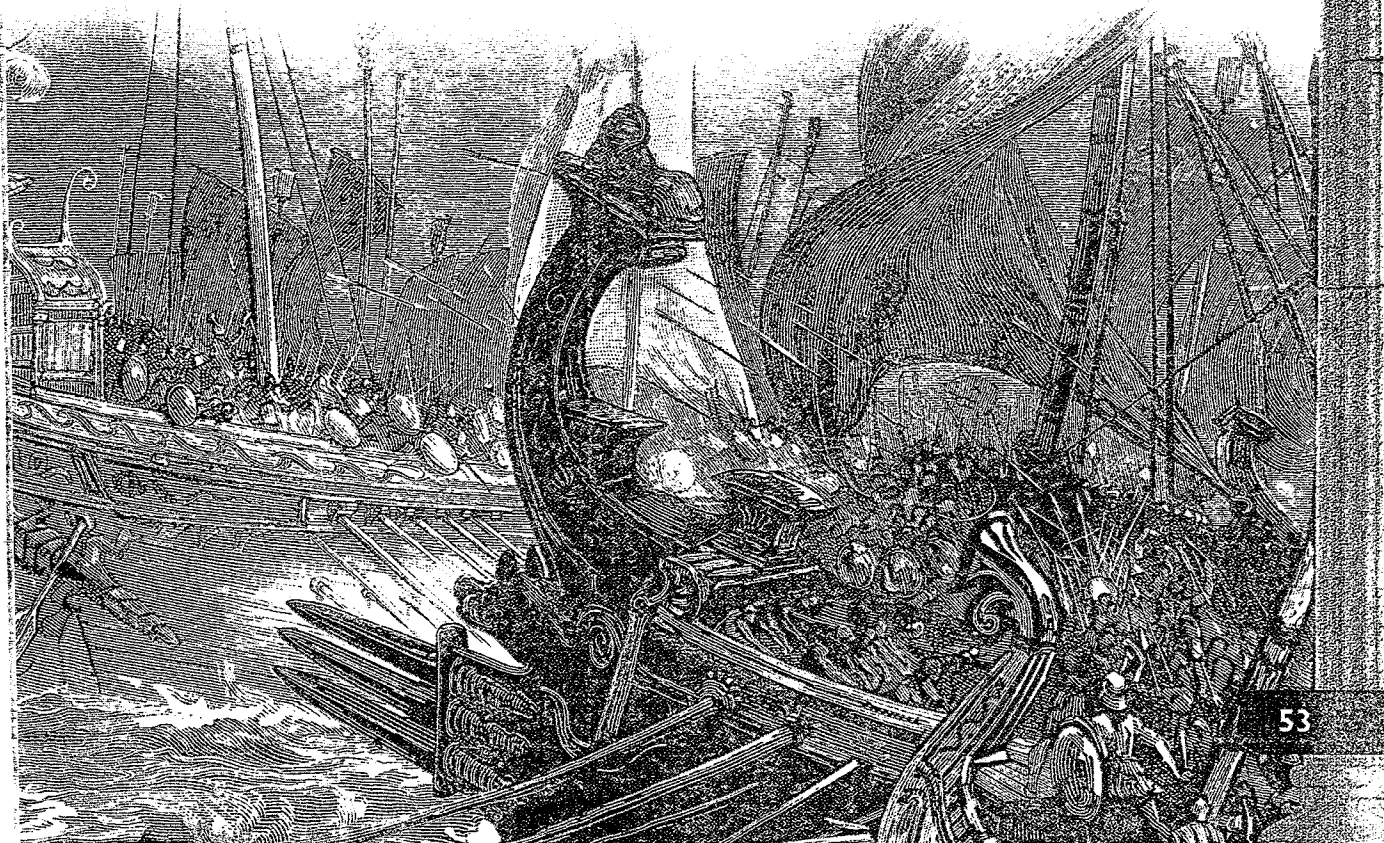
Salamis

The heroism of the Spartan troops slowed the Persian army but did not stop it. Xerxes marched south to Athens and burned the city to the ground. Fortunately, most of the citizens had been warned that Xerxes was coming and had evacuated.

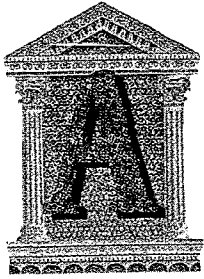
After the burning of Athens, the Persians were set to conquer all of southern Greece. Xerxes decided to lead with his navy. The two fleets clashed near an island called Salamis (SAL uh mihs). The Persians had big ships, but the Greeks knew the waterways better than the Persians did. The Athenian navy lured the Persian fleet into shallow waters. There, the Greek ships rammed and sank the Persian ships. The Greeks had also filled their boats with soldiers, who attacked the men on board the Persian ships. These tactics enabled the Athenian navy to defeat the huge Persian fleet.

Stunned by this unexpected defeat, Xerxes immediately left Greece and sailed home. The next year, 479 B.C., the Spartan general Pausanias (paw SAY nee us) led the Greeks against the Persians in the battle of Plataea (pluh TEE uh). Pausanias won the battle and drove the Persian army out of Greece.

Based on ancient sources, this nineteenth-century painting shows the Battle of Salamis between the Greeks and the Persians. The Greeks were victorious.



The Peloponnesian War 7



thens versus Sparta As Athens built its empire, Sparta looked on with concern. The Spartans worried that Athens was becoming too powerful. They also resented Athenian attempts to push Athenian-style democracy on other Greek city-states.

Sparta and several of its allies, including the city-states of Corinth and Thebes, came together to form the Peloponnesian League. This league was named for the Peloponnesus (pel uh puh NEE sus), a mountainous peninsula that forms the southern part of Greece. Sparta and several of its allies were located on the Peloponnesus.

During the 430s B.C., diplomatic relations between Athens and the Peloponnesian League deteriorated. Finally, in 431 the Peloponnesian War broke out. This devastating war continued for more than 25 years and would eventually put an end to the Athenian empire.

Beginning of the War

At the outset of the war, Pericles was still the leader of Athens. Pericles knew that the Spartan army was stronger than the Athenian army, but he also knew that Athens had a stronger navy. If the Athenians could avoid a major land battle, Pericles believed they had a good chance of winning.

Pericles came up with a strategy. He decided that the Spartans probably wanted a quick victory and not a slow, lengthy war. So Athens would refuse to meet the Spartan army in a land battle in which the Athenians would probably be defeated. While the Spartans were trying to make them fight, the Athenians would hole up behind the walls they had built. Meanwhile, the Athenians would use their navy to bring supplies to Athens and to attack towns along the coast of the Peloponnesus.

Pericles convinced the citizens of Athens to follow his plan. All the farmers who lived in the area around Athens were told to leave their farms and take refuge in the city. The country people poured into the city, bringing with them their wives, their children, and their most valuable belongings. The historian Thucydides reported that many of them brought not only their furniture but also their doors and their window shutters!

An ancient Greek warrior, about to go to battle, boards his chariot on this marble frieze.



When the Spartans marched on Athens, they found a deserted countryside. They burned the crops in the fields as well as the farmhouses. The Athenians could see the smoke from the fires. They begged Pericles to let them fight. But the cautious Pericles thought fighting would be too dangerous. The crops would grow back, Pericles told the Athenians, but "dead men will not." Pericles had decided on a waiting game. He figured the longer the Spartans had to wait for the Athenians to come out and fight, the fewer supplies they would have.

During the first year of the war, this strategy was successful. Since they had burned the fields, the Spartans could not find any food. Finally, the Spartan army gave up and left. By the time they made it home, the Athenian navy had attacked several of the coastal cities of the Peloponnesus.

The War Continues

The second year of the war began with another Spartan land attack. Once again, the Athenian people retreated behind their walls. This time, however, things did not turn out so well for the Athenians. A terrible **plague** swept through the city, killing nearly a quarter of the population.

The plague lasted for three years. It was so terrible that the people of Athens became deeply

discouraged. They wondered if the gods were against them, and they started to lose faith in their ideals of reason and order. Life and property became cheap. People no longer felt that honesty, truth, and justice had any meaning. Worst of all, Pericles died in the plague and was replaced by men who were not as wise as he had been.

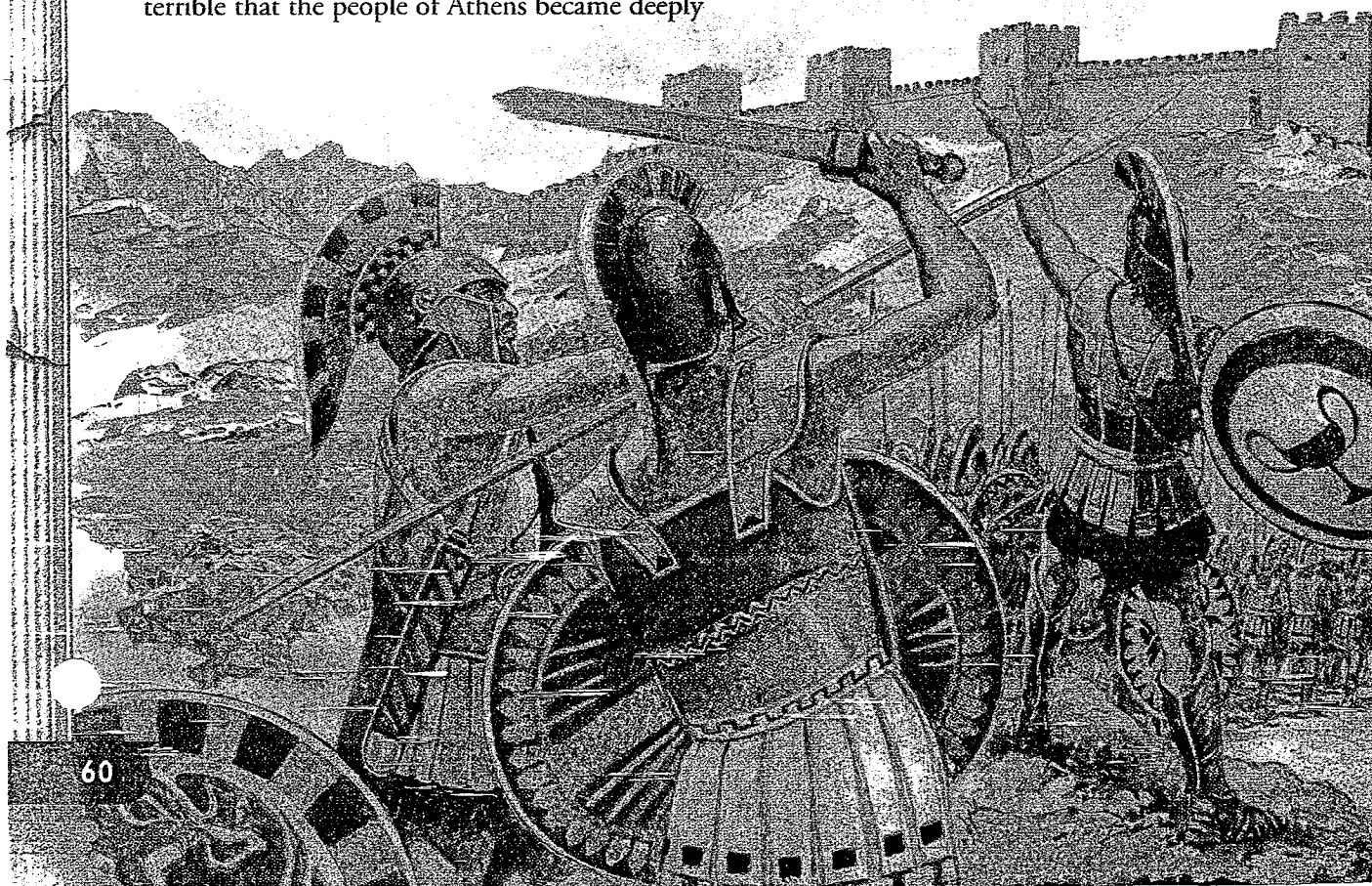
The war dragged on for years with no victory for either side.

As long as the Athenian army would not fight the Spartan army, the Spartans could not win. As long as the Athenian navy only made random raids on the Peloponnesian cities, the Athenians could not win. Something had to be done.

About 415 B.C., an Athenian named Alcibiades (al suh BYE uh deez) proposed that the Athenians conquer the island of Sicily, now a part of Italy but then inhabited by Greeks. This island was on the other side of the Peloponnesus. If it was conquered, then Athens could renew its supplies, attack Sparta from both sides, and defeat their archrivals. Some Athenian citizens liked

vocabulary

plague a disease that sweeps through a town or country, causing many to die



the idea. It was bold and daring. A few were not so sure. They didn't feel they had the military strength to conquer Sicily and carry on a war with Sparta and its allies at the same time. They also distrusted Alcibiades. He was a very charming young man, but he spent too much, drank too much, gambled too much, and talked too much. He didn't respect many of the traditions and ideals of the Athenians. He was power hungry and spent much of his time making plans to become more important.

Still, enough Athenian citizens liked the idea that the decision was made to invade Sicily. The invasion was a disaster. The invading Athenian army met strong resistance. They held out for as long as they could but finally tried to escape in a panic. The army was divided, many were killed, and still others were taken captive and made slaves in the rock quarries in Sicily. They lived out the rest of their lives in misery, far away from their democracy in Athens.

Alcibiades was ordered to return to Athens before the invasion even began, but he decided to flee to Sparta instead. There, he told the Spartans of Athens' plans. He was willing to be a traitor in order to save his own skin. The Spartans took the

The Spartans prepare to attack the Athenians.

information but did not trust him. Soon, he figured out that they might kill him, so he fled again—this time to Persia (where they didn't trust him either).

The Sicilian disaster tilted the balance of power in favor of Sparta. The Athenian army and navy had been seriously weakened by the defeats in Sicily. Now, the Spartans began to build a navy of their own. They also enlisted the Persians as allies. In 405 B.C. the Spartans scored a major naval victory. This enabled them to cut off grain supplies to Athens. Athens held out as long as it could, but in 404 B.C. the city surrendered. The Spartans and their allies had won the Peloponnesian War.

The Spartans made the Athenians tear down the walls that protected their city. They kept Athens from having a navy, and they set up the government they wanted Athens to have. Athens would be ruled by a group of 30 nobles. There would be no more democracy.

However, the nobles were so corrupt and cruel that within a year the Athenians had rebelled against them. In 403 B.C., democracy was restored. The kings of Sparta decided that as long as Athens was peaceful, they would let the Athenian citizens have their democracy. But the Athenian empire and the Golden Age of Athens were over.

